Japanese Drama and Western Drama[1)]

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The writing of plays for the theatre is an art quite different from the writing of poetry or fiction. The poet and the novelist have much more freedom to invent new forms and to experiment with new ideas. All the poet or novelist needs is a publisher (in modern times) willing to take a risk on him or a circle of friends (in older times) to circulate his manuscripts among. Sometimes the mere novelty of the poet or novelist's work inspires the publisher to print and distribute his writings. The dramatist, however, must please a great many people. In any age, a dramatic production on the stage of a theatre is an expensive and time-consuming operation. Large sums of money had to be raised to produce Shakespeare, Seami, Chikamatsu, and Eugene O'Neill. Financial support for their works had to come either from kings or princes sensitive to the arts or from the general public willing to pay admission to the theatre. The playwright has always had to please the patron or to compete for popularity at the box office. Usually the playwright finds the form of the drama already fixed before he begins to write. Thus Shakespeare had little choice but to write five-act tragedies or, if he had been asked, masques for the royal court. The five-act tragedy was the dominant form of the drama before Shakespeare and for a century after him. Chikamatsu had the choice either of the *kabuki* or the puppet play, and shifted from one to another as difficulties developed in the theatre, difficulties which threatened the freedom of his art. Seami, perhaps of all the world's great playwrights, was an innovator and creator of a form, though his *Nō* plays were based in part on an earlier folk drama. Yet, after Seami, it would have been a remarkable dramatist indeed who changed the form of the *Nō*. Whatever may be the value of his efforts, the

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twentieth-century Japanese writer Yukio Mishima ought to be given great credit for his attempt, in *Five Modern Nō Plays*, to create a new form based on this highly traditional art.

When we consider that the dramatist has always been compelled to deal with the social and economic facts of the theatre, it is remarkable that dramatic art reached such a peak of excellence. There are superficial similarities between Japanese and European drama which are the result of similar economic conditions. The *Nō* drama is poetic and lacking in action just as the Elizabethan court masque is poetic and lacking in action. Though the *Nō* drama is far superior, both types of drama depended on the patronage of a sensitive and aristocratic audience, and neither required the support of a popular audience. But, the Elizabethan court masque is chiefly a device by which dramatists flattered kings and princes. It was a kind of pageant in praise of royalty, and these plays do not have much interest for us today. The *Nō*, on the other hand, is not patriotic, is not written to flatter lords and masters, and is not merely pretty and entertaining. Usually it depicts a spiritual or philosophical state or mood in a highly elusive poetic style. Such dramas must have been played, at least in the beginning, to a most sophisticated and aesthetic court audience. The ability to appreciate and even to write poetry was certainly highly developed among the nobles who attended the court of Queen Elizabeth. Yet the court masque remains a trivial and unimportant form of drama. On the other hand, the audience which attended the early *Nō* plays must have been the most remarkable aristocratic audience in world drama. We know from Seami's writings that this audience was sensitive not only to words but to the dancing, acting and music of the production. He has left us writings which deal specifically with the problems of the actor. The actor must, he tells us, be keenly aware of the mood of the audience (which is affected even by the time of day and the weather) and adjust his performance to the audience's needs. What the *Nō* play lacks, by Western standard, is sustained dramatic action. The action of the *Nō* play is over, as it were, before it starts. For example, long ago Atsumori died in battle at a tender age. We meet his ghost, and the fact of his death is softened by the remoteness of the event. Some Western critics, for

this reason, tend to think of *Nō* as poetry rather than drama, but this is a mistake, because more than with a Western play a *Nō* play must be experienced on the stage. Much of the effect of Shakespearean play can be obtained from reading the words; *Nō* drama is more dependent on its music, dance and song.

The *Nō* drama, I think, is the finest achievement of Asian drama. It would seem to me to be superior to Sanskrit drama, though Kālidāsa is one of the world's great playwrights. Only in India and Japan has a major drama developed in the East. The Chinese have always regarded drama as a minor art and drama scarcely exists west of Pakistan. It is curious to note also that Japanese drama is the most "oriental" in its philosophy of all the kinds of Asian drama, though it is dangerous to generalize about ways of thinking if you apply your generalizations to a whole people. I am, for instance, wholly unconvinced by Mr. Arnold Toynbee's characterizations of Asian civilizations in his *Study of History*. Mr. Toynbee seems to me to be merely a later, Christian version of Oswald Spengler. Even Mr. F. S. Northrup's generalizations about Asian thinking seem over simple to many Western historians and philosophers. The Japanese *Nō* drama, however, because of its Buddhist background and its elusive, poetic, allusive character, seems to represent "oriental" ways of thought and feeling for Westerners, whether or not this idea is correct. Sanskrit drama, on the other hand, is "Western" in the sense that it is highly rational and close to Greek (Aristotelian) drama in theory.

When we turn to *kabuki* and *bunraku* we find a drama which has affinities with Western drama. Both Shakespeare and Chikamatsu write plays which contain violent action and which deal with the lives of historical heroes. Shakespeare in his history plays survives a broad pageant of English history almost up to his own time. In his tragedies kings and princes plot and fight and die in accordance with feudal rules of honor. Chikamatsu likewise depicts historical events, some of them fairly recent, in his dramas of honor and violence. In the staging of both Shakespeare's and Chikamatsu's plays, the actors must have great stage presence, and pageantry and dignity rather than realism characterize the presentation, though the operatic *recita-*

tive of *kabuki* is less realistic than Elizabethan dramatic recitation.

If a value judgement must be made between Elizabethan tragedy and history plays and *kabuki* and *bunraku*, it can only be made perhaps by consideration of the different audiences of Shakespeare and Chikamatsu. Superficially, they are similar: popular, middle class audiences with a sprinkling of aristocrats who came to the theatre for pleasure while, at the same time, feeling that the theatre was not wholly respectable. In both cases, the ring of the cash register, to use a modern expression, singled the success of a play. Both Elizabethan drama and *kabuki* suffered occasionally from censorship by political powers or from pressure groups who thought the drama immoral or subversive. However, it is probably true that Chikamatsu's audience and the Edo period in general is a less important period in Japanese history than the Elizabethan one in England. Shakespeare felt very greatly the splendid and dynamic age of Elizabeth. There is in his works an enlightened patriotism for an England which had become suddenly great and which had recently passed through great dangers. His heroes have more immediacy than Chikamatsu's. The great *samurai* are not warring in the Edo period, while during Shakespeare's lifetime all Englishmen were conscious of their victories in a life and death struggle with France. Thus Shakespeare's age was likely to inspire a dramatist or poet to greater efforts than the age of Chikamatsu. Just as the *Nō* audience was superior to the audience of Shakespeare's time in its learning and its appreciation of dramatic subtilties, so the audience of Shakespeare's time was superior to the audience of *kabuki* in its appreciation of great themes and complicated poetic language. Chikamatsu's achievement is remarkable in that he had to adapt his ideas to a very complex theatre situation and to an audience that was fundamentally interested in entertainment, not in great ideas. We do not know, of course, which the audience of *kabuki* in the Edo period liked better, the manner of dramatic recital or the words of the play, but Chikamatsu's literary achievement is considerable. Some of his plays, certainly, could be produced in realistic Western or in Shakespearean style. But the life of his times caused him to labor under difficulties which Shakespeare did not experience.

In brief, I wonder whether Chikamatsu might not have accomplished more working in the freer dramatic tradition of the West. The subject matter of his plays—heroic themes and domestic pathos—is perfectly suitable for Western drama after the Elizabethan period. And the special acting traditions of *kabuki* and *bunraku* do not seem fundamentally important to his art.

It is to the *Nō* play that I must return for a comment on what is perhaps the greatest feature of dramatic art in Japan. Poetic drama has been attempted by many playwrights in many cultures, sometimes, as in the *Nō*, allied with music and dance. A considerable number of Western poets in recent times have attempted dramatic works. William Butler Yeats's experiments (influenced by the *Nō*) come to the mind of any Western interested in Japanese drama. I am not, however, much impressed by Yeats's attempts; certainly his imitation *Nō* plays do not rank with the best of his poems.

The modern dramatist who has been most successful with poetic drama is certainly the Spaniard Frederico Garcia Lorca, who combines poetic language and the occasional use of songs with drama of great intensity and power. But the idea of a drama which would be at once allusive and suggestive and highly poetic and also powerfully dramatic constantly appeals to Western writers. Shakespearean poetic drama, however great, is not of this type. And Western dramatists have been generally unsuccessful in attempting to combine words, song and dance. Always, one of these elements dominates. Richard Wagner believed he was creating an art form in which words, music, dance and stage design would combine equally in a new art. But it is perfectly clear that the words of Wagner's dramas are unimportant compared to the music, so we have opera not drama. Generally, Western dramatists talk much about the importance of the stage performance of their dramas, but in fact Western drama is literary, not musical or theatrical, and the dramas we consider great are all plays which depend on words for most of their effects. As I have said, most of a Shakespearean drama is obvious to a reader who does not go near the theatre. That the verbal element dominates is true of most Western drama since the Renaissance. There is reason to think that the ancient Greek drama, somewhat like the *Nō*, depended more on a musical performance.

The great achievement of Japanese drama is in the balance of verbal and theatrical elements in the *Nō*. The greatness of Seami, from a Western point of view, is that he was in fact what many Westerners interested in the drama have long held up to be an ideal. In Seami the poet and the dramatist are combined in a genius who is also an expert on the production of plays—an expert even on such matters as the gauging of audience psychology and on the training of actors. Late 19th century theorists of the drama in Europe held as their ideal a man who could write a play which was both great literature and great drama, and who could also act, dance, direct and create music and stage settings. Seami was close to such an ideal. And the *Nō* drama, because of its harmonious balance of literary and theatrical achievement, seems to me to be the supreme accomplishment of Japanese drama.